

Redirecting Redirection: Understanding Directive Use in Secondary Classroom Activities

Brandie L. Bohnney

Department of English, IU School of Liberal Arts
Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis

Secondary teachers use directives—speech acts that are intended to cause the hearer to act in some way—regularly in the classroom, and the purpose of this research is to examine how classroom activities affect teacher directive use and how effective teacher directives are in various activities. In particular, this study targets teachers of students who struggle academically. The data used was collected using direct observation of two pairs of cooperating teachers of low-achieving ninth-grade English and Geography students. In the data, two of the five identified functions of directives in the classroom suggested areas for pedagogical improvements regarding teacher directive use. One is redirection (directives such as “Do not throw things in class,” requiring students to replace unwanted behaviors with more desirable ones) and the other is for-response directives (those that intend for students to provide some sort of answer or response, such as “How do you prove that?”). Group-work activities in the classroom resulted in an increased use of redirection directives. Conversely, inquiry-heavy review and lecture activities resulted in an increased use of for-response directives, and students were far more compliant to the directives for response than to those intended for redirection. Thus, two significant conclusions can be drawn from the research: (1) use of for-response directives leads to more effective student-teacher interaction, and (2) the regular use of redirection in group work is not only less effective, but may also contribute to greater non-compliance and disruption in the group-work setting. The increased success and engagement using directives for response found here suggests that teachers of lower-level students should not only use inquiry strategies regularly in their classrooms, but they should also seek out training and support in inquiry strategies to improve their pedagogy. In addition, the study indicates that adjustments to directive use paired with additional scaffolding will result in more successful group activities for struggling students.